Introduction to the Discussion of “Need and Culture in Nietzsche”

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1942 represented a watershed year in the development of critical theory. A year earlier, Horkheimer had moved, along with Adorno, to Pacific Palisades, California, where the two began work on their “book of dialectics,” *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Yet, as their early discussions for the project attest (the transcripts have been recently collected in volume 12 of Horkheimer’s *Gesammelte Schriften*), the book’s content and direction remained open-ended. In fact, it seems that initially the two philosophers had in mind very different conceptions of what the final result might look like. Horkheimer envisioned a book on “dialectical logic” that would retain a positive attitude towards the tradition of dialectical thought and the prospects of emancipation embodied therein, despite of the calamitous turn of recent history. Adorno, conversely, had already experimented with the rudiments of “negative dialectics,” which stressed the “context of total delusion” enveloping late capitalist society and the perils of identity-thinking. Clearly, in the end Adorno’s perspective won out, and the “positive” sequel they intended to write under the provisional title, *Redemption of Enlightenment*, never saw the light of print.¹

During the summer of 1942 the rump Institute for Social Research, still under Horkheimer’s directorship, organized a series of discussions on the “theory of needs” (*Bedürfnisse*) in advanced industrial society to which other leftwing German émigrés were invited (e.g., Bertolt Brecht and Hanns Eisler). Recent historical experiences tied to the rise of “state capitalism” (the Keynesian welfare state) suggested that the crisis theory integral to Marx’s critique of capitalism had become obsolete. The seminars attempted to answer the paramount question: what remains of Marxism (and, by implication, of critical theory itself) if Marx’s theory of immiseration proved untenable and capitalism for the foreseeable future were able to satisfy basic human needs. Of course, during the 1930s, critical theory had focused extensively on the manifestations of cultural domination that prevented the European working class from attaining class consciousness. But state capitalism’s recent success both in staving off crisis tendencies and “delivering the goods” represented a fundamental structural challenge to critical Marxism in general.

During the summer of 1942 the Institute held five symposia focusing on the problem of needs under advanced capitalism. Papers were presented by 1) Pollock,
2) Ludwig Marcuse (summarized below along with the ensuing discussion),
3) Horkheimer and Adorno,² 4) Günther Anders, and, lastly, 5) an unidentified

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presenter on Aldous Huxley’s novel, \textit{Brave New World}. Both Pollock and Gretel Adorno transcribed the ensuing discussions among Institute members and their guests. Among the recurring leitmotifs in the colloquia following the papers, two are especially worthy of note. Time and again the discussants have recourse to a New Deal proclamation by President Roosevelt’s Secretary of Agriculture, Henry Foster Wallace, “there will be a pint of milk a day for every child.” This relatively innocuous statement was greeted by most of the Institute members (Pollock being the notable exception) with revulsion cum horror. For them it indicated (in keeping with the thematics under discussion) the prospect of a society of abundance that nevertheless fell well short of the utopian-emancipatory promise of Socialism proper. It was merely another instance of the way in which the radical inclinations of the working classes had been diverted and placated by the “bread and circuses” strategy of capitalist consumer society.

The other theme worth noting is the Institute members’ obsessive fascination with Huxley’s 1932 novel, \textit{Brave New World}. Of course, none was enamored of Huxley’s unabashed cultural elitism. But an examination of the discussion transcript shows that they endowed Huxley’s dystopian prophecies with quasi-evidentiary status. If one wanted to gain insight into the future shape of consumption-driven mass society, there was, it seemed, no better point of reference than Huxley’s novel. For the Frankfurt Schools’ inner circle, it epitomized the political prospect they came to fear most: frenzied material progress minus emancipation, thereby standing Marx’s technological optimism on its head. Moreover, the critical theorists reasoned that since the reality-transcending capacities of culture were predicated on material need, the universal satisfaction of need also meant the end of cultural transcendence in general – a reality that had seemingly come to pass with the “cultural industry.” As the critical theorists explain: “The progress of industrial society leads to the abolition of transcendence and thereby to the abolition of religion, art, science (with the exception of technology), etc.” In retrospect it seems clear that \textit{Brave New World} had become a touchstone for Horkheimer’s and Adorno’s “diagnosis of the age”: in their eyes, it functioned as a paradigmatic cautionary tale about the dangers of “introjected domination” and a “totally administered world.” As such, it anticipates the “culture industry” chapter of \textit{Dialectic of Enlightenment} as well as Marcuse’s theory of “repressive desublimation” in \textit{One-Dimensional Man}.

The following discussion of “need and culture in Nietzsche,” then, reveals critical theory at a crucial turning point. For not only had Marx’s crisis theory been rendered passé as a result of the structural reforms undertaken by state capitalism. Under the Bolsheviks and Stalin, Marxism had increasingly degenerated into an inflexible and repressive ideology of legitimation. Thus, the crossroads critical theory faced appeared under the sign: \textit{Marx or Nietzsche}?

As the discussion transcript shows, the battle lines were clearly drawn. Adorno, following the hints provided by Ludwig Marcuse’s paper, enthusiastically

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endorsed the incorporation of Nietzschean currents and themes. He believed that, in his famous indictment of “The Last Man” in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and other texts, Nietzsche provided a critique of bourgeois life much more radical than anything found in Marx. Pollock and Marcuse, on the other hand, would have none of it. At one point Marcuse expressed his reservations quite forcefully, exclaiming: “If Marx is right, then Nietzsche is wrong!”

Horkheimer’s position falls somewhere between the aforementioned two camps; yet, when pressed, he remains wedded to a number of basic Marxist premises. As he remarks at one point: “Marx said so long as a certain material need exists in society, the most important thing to do is to remove it. Under these circumstances is not any style of writing that fails to call a spade a spade – does not admit that it is our task to change these circumstances – afflicted by a profound contradiction? . . . Marx did not speak about love, he was content to denounce society. Can one really formulate [a critical perspective] other than that?”

We conclude with perceptive commentaries on “Need and Culture in Nietzsche” by Gunzelin Schmid Noerr and Rolf Wiggershaus.

NOTES

1. For a discussion between Horheimer and Adorno concerning a planned sequel to *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, see Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 12 (Frankfurt: Fischer Verlag, 1985), 593ff.
2. For Horkheimer’s presentation, “Zum Problem der Bedürfnisse,” see GS 12, 252ff. For Adorno’s, see his “Thesen Uber Bedürfnis,” *Schriften* 8.1 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1980), 392ff.
3. Later Adorno would pen a critique of Huxley in *Prisms*, “Aldous Huxley and Utopia.”
4. Brecht remained of a more skeptical disposition. About Huxley, he remarks: “Huxley only fears the dime stores because then there will be no more Huxley.”
Myth and Greek culture. Given Nietzsche’s pejorative view of historiography as practised in the 19th century, why does he consider the return to myth to be an issue of vital importance? There is no question that Nietzsche’s view of myth was influenced by his admiration for the Greeks. In his early work, The Birth of Tragedy, Nietzsche elaborates his account of the value of tragic myth and of its subsequent decline in classical Greece. In fact, Euripides’ approach to the theatre represents the introduction of Socratic rationalism on stage in particular and onto Greek culture in general. Reason is valorised as that distinctive human faculty which can discover the laws that govern the natural and social world. As a result nature would be controlled and a just society. Need and Culture in Nietzsche: Adorno, Horkheimer and Marcuse 131. calculate, learning to think causally. However, the ‘blond beast’ is complement, gathers into a unity what the ‘free spirit’ unravels. Discussion HERBERT MARCUSE: Why the contrast between the superman and the blond beast? Did Nietzsche not see also the blond beast as already utopian? LUDWIG MARCUSE: Nietzsche’s language fluctuates a lot.